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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2023  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000443

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN KICKS OUT FAITH-BASED NGO'S EXPAT STAFF

REF: DUSHANBE 368

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey Ann Jacobson, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy,  
Dushanbe, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b)

[11.](#) (SBU) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Consular Department Chief Bahrom Kholnazarov summoned Paul Linge, Country Director of Operation Mercy, March 29 to inform him that Operation Mercy's foreign, non-Tajik, staff would have to leave Tajikistan within ten days. Kholnazarov instructed Linge to submit the expatriates' passports to the Ministry the same day for exit visas. Kholnazarov said that two staff members and their families would be permitted to remain in Tajikistan. He offered a compromise and suggested that the expats could leave Tajikistan and return on tourist visas. (Note: Without work visas, they may not legally continue their jobs at Operation Mercy. End Note.) The decision affects 32 international staff, eight of whom are American citizens.

[12.](#) (SBU) When ConOff called Kholnazarov to inquire about the decision, Kholnazarov would not confirm that he had given a deadline of ten days for Operation Mercy's staff to leave Tajikistan. (Note: Linge maintains that Kholnazarov asserted the ten day limit. End Note.) Kholnazarov explained to ConOff that Operation Mercy staff simply could not stay in Tajikistan given that the local court has issued a statement on February 22 ordering Operation Mercy to stop its classes and activities until the Ministry of Education grants it a license to teach English language classes (reftel).

[13.](#) (C) According to Operation Mercy's lawyer, a Deputy Minister of Justice relayed to her that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision to order the expats depart cannot be based on the court's statement and has no legal basis. Operation Mercy filed an appeal on the court's decision, but has not received a reply from the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Education refuses to grant Operation Mercy a license because Operation Mercy is working outside of its charter, based on "evidence" obtained from a single slanderous newspaper article, mostly likely written by a disgruntled former employee.

[14.](#) (C) Linge commented that Kholnazarov was apologetic and sympathetic during the meeting. Kholnazarov indicated that the decision did not come from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but "other" sources, inferring the State Committee on National Security (formerly the Ministry of Security) is behind the decision. It is unclear to Linge why the State Committee on

National Security is investigating Operation Mercy. He asserts that Operation Mercy has abided by all laws and regulations. The organization has submitted all necessary documentation promptly to apply for a license to teach English classes when it learned of the deficiency.

15. (SBU) Although Operation Mercy characterizes itself as a non-denominational, non-governmental organization, its staff are motivated into international assistance work based on their Christian convictions and the organization is considered a faith-based non-governmental organization.

16. (SBU) Post has sent a diplomatic note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting an official explanation for ordering Operation Mercy's international staff's departure and expressing concern over the government's continuing hostile behavior towards non-governmental organizations. Embassy Officers are engaging multiple ministries in an attempt to find a legal solution suitable to both sides. Officers are in frequent communication with Operation Mercy's American citizen employees. The British Embassy had contacted post and is also seeking clarification from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as a number of the affected Operation Mercy employees are either citizens of the United Kingdom or the Commonwealth.

17. (C) COMMENT: Operation Mercy's latest problem is another example of the government's intolerance towards nongovernmental organizations. The Ministries of Justice, Education and Foreign Affairs justification for their decisions shows the use of rule by law in Tajikistan, not rule of law. It is also a clear example of how the State Committee on National Security can manipulate other ministries to achieve its goals.

18. (C) At this point, there is no indication that the government is targeting Christians. Operation Mercy staff

DUSHANBE 00000443 002 OF 002

reports that some local Christians have been harassed and questioned by the State Committee on National Security, but specifically in relation to their activity with Operation Mercy.

PolOff has met with other members of the Christian community and they have not reported any negative behavior from the government. A Korean Christian Church is battling an ongoing property dispute with the government, but the motivation does not appear to be religion. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON  
HUSHEK